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THE HYPNOTIC METER OF "THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE"

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*"The joy and function of poetry is, and was, the celebration of man,
which is also the celebration of God" --Dylan Thomas*

Poetry, at its core, is like a well-functioning automobile: myriad parts working in conjunction towards a common goal or effect. If one part is missing, then the automobile shutters, sputters, collapses and dies, thus so with poetry. One of the many devices at a poet's disposal is meter. Paul Fussell Jr., author of *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, gives a wonderfully succinct definition of meter:

Meter is what results when the natural rhythmical movements of colloquial speech are heightened, organized, and regulated so that pattern emerges from the relative phonetic haphazard of ordinary utterance. Because it inhabits the physical form of the very words themselves, meter is the most fundamental technique of order available to the poet (Fussell 5)

Meter may be the "most fundamental technique," but it is ripe with meaning. Lord Alfred Tennyson, composer of beautifully melodic verse during the Victorian Age, used meter to create for the reader a musical milieu. In his 1854 poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade," Tennyson uses dactylic meter (stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables) to slip the reader into a hypnotic state and to convey to the reader the futility of the charge.

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" describes a misguided charge by the Light Brigade against the Russians near Balaclava on October 25, 1854 (Marshall 135). The pre-decided cardinal direction of the charge was lost during a message transmit prior to the event, and the result was devastating. On December 2 of the same year, Tennyson read of the account of the charge in *The Times*, and he immediately "transform[ed] the sacrifices of war into musical offerings" (Tucker 356). Charles Tennyson, grandson of Lord Alfred and author of *Alfred Tennyson*, further gives an account of the birth of the poem: "The phrase 'someone had blundered,' which occurred in *The Times* account, gave him the keynote" (283). On December 9, Tennyson sent a copy of the poem to John Forester's paper *The Examiner*. The poem was immensely successful, with "2,000 copies printed for the soldiers in the Crimea after a request from a chaplain telling of its great popularity with the troops (Marshall 135).

In the poem, Tennyson employs a dactylic meter which can be seen in the opening stanza of the poem.

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
Forward, the Light Brigade!
'Charge for the guns!' he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred. (ln. 1-8)

The gentle lulling effect of dactylic meter is immediately apparent. In the first line, the stress on the twice-occurring word "Half", and the unstressed words "a" and "league" cause a feeling of descent to occur. Moreover, Tennyson substitutes trochaic meter (stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable) into his verse as a deviation from dactylic. The line "Rode the six hundred" is trochaic but continues in the foreboding and hypnotic style of the previous lines.

Scholars such as Theodore T. Stenberg have argued that Tennyson's meter was subconsciously inspired by lesser known earlier works such as Thomas Moore's "Here, while the moonlight is dim." The first stanza of Moore is quoted in Stenberg's article "A Word on the Sources of the Charge of the Light Brigade" (1923):

Here, while the moonlight is dim
Falls on that mossy brim,
Sing we our Fountain Hymn,
Maiden of Zea!
Nothing but Music's strain,
When Lovers part in pain,
Soothes, till they meet again,
Oh, Maids of Zea! (ln. 1-8)

The first line of the poem is constructed in dactylic meter, with the stress falling on "Here" and "moon" out of "moonlight." Additionally, Moore substitutes troches, as in the eighth line: "Oh, Maids of Zea!" Stenberg, along with Charles Tennyson, further cite the third stanza from Chatterton's "Songe to Aella" as evidence that Tennyson was consciously or subconsciously influenced by an earlier work.¹

Drawne hie thyne anlace fell
Downe to the depth of helle
Thousands of Dacyans went;

Brýstowánnēs, mēn of myghte,
Tdar'd the bloudie fyghte,
And actedd deeds full quent.

As with the Moore poem, the reader witnesses dactylic meter in the opening line: "Drawne hie thyne anlace fell;" however, the substitutions of trochaic meter do not occur in the stanza excerpt provided by Stenberg.

Both the Stenberg article (1923) and Tennyson's biography (1949) are virtually archaic in the ever-evolving world of scholarly research and criticism. The argument that Tennyson was influenced by outside metrical usage is a moot point. Poets and artists in general, are continually influenced, consciously or subconsciously, by surrounding artist's work. It would be naïve and preposterous to think that Tennyson created and utilized the dactylic meter without the understanding that other previous poets had done the same. A.A. Markley, in a more recent article titled "Barbarous Hexameters and Dainty Meters: Tennyson's Uses of Classical Versification" (1998), accepts the fact that Tennyson borrowed metrical patterns and credits the poet, not for borrowing metrical patterns, but for enhancing his poetry by doing so. "[Tennyson's] intense study of Greek and Latin poetry provided a particularly rich source of metrical inspiration... [he] handled each one with meticulous precision, as he was greatly invested in the metrical perfection of his poems," (456) Markley explains.

As briefly mentioned above, what is of interest is how Tennyson manipulated the dactylic metrical pattern to slip the reader into a hypnotic state. Fussell, as a metrical theorist, explains that there are two distinct arguments for how meter affects a reader. Most rationalist theorists would see that "meter is pleasant because it focuses the reader's attention and refines his [sic] awareness," while most romanticist theorists would argue that "since the beat in most accental poetry is slightly faster than the normal heart beat, the apprehension of metered language exhilarates the hearer or reader physically: the heart beat, it is said, actually speeds up in an effort to 'match' the slightly faster poetic rhythm;" thus, "meter operates by inducing in the reader a state resembling hypnosis" (Fussell 5). Laurence Perrine, author of *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, also picks up on the idea that metrical pattern is mimicked in the human anatomy: "[meter] is related to the beat of our hearts, the pulse of our blood, the intake and outflow of air from our lungs" Perrine (180).

It is true that the dactylic "meter is pleasant because it focuses the reader's attention and refines his awareness" (Fussell 5), but if we took that statement alone, we would be limiting Tennyson's usage of dactylic meter and of poetry in general. We cannot simply analyze if the meter "refines our awareness," as Fussell puts it. Tennyson did

not choose the dactylic meter that he did simply to be pleasant and to “refine our awareness,” he chooses the dactylic meter because it can be felt deep within the human body. The meter, as is the case with all successful uses of meter, resonates within the anatomy of the body. The meter forces the breathing, the pulse, the heartbeat to accelerate or decelerate depending on the meter. Meter is a deeply powerful poetic device and is a “prime physical and emotional constituent of poetic meaning” (Fussell 3). The romanticist theorists of meter are correct when they argue that “meter operates by inducing in the reader a state resembling hypnosis” (Fussell 5), and by allowing the mechanics of the human body to parallel the dactylic meter Tennyson slides his reader into “a state resembling hypnosis.”

“The Charge of the Light Brigade” is specifically targeted to parallel the “pulse of our blood” and “the intake and outflow of air from our lungs.” The subject matter of the poem is a futile charge made by the British to “recapture some guns lost to the Russians” (Marshall 135), and the metrical pattern matches the subject matter and overall tone. The third stanza describes the action for the reader:

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred. (ln. 19-27)

The “noble six hundred,” as they are later referenced by Tennyson, are making their disastrous charge with cannon fire and shrapnel exploding all around them. Tennyson descriptively writes that they are metaphorically riding into the “jaws of Death” and the “mouth of Hell,” and the dactylic meter that he utilizes in the poem is wisely chosen and handled with “meticulous precision” (Markley 456).

Moreover, the third stanza has stress on powerful words such as “Boldly” “Cannon” and “Storm'd.” At the same time, the hypnotic sense is still instilled into the reader through anaphora. Lines 19-21 (Cannon to right of them, / Cannon to left of them, / Cannon in front of them), and lines 25-26 (Into the jaws of Death, / Into the mouth of Hell) are repetitive with starkly similar imagery (Cannons in the lines 19-21 and facial features in lines 25-26). The anaphora utilized in lines 19-21 and lines 25-26 facilitate, along with the dactylic meter, the lulling of the reader into a hypnotic state as the reader becomes comfortable through repetition.

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" was written after Tennyson had refined his metrical abilities and solidified his poetic legacy. Yet, when he was a young man trying to discover his poetic voice he received some malicious comments concerning meter from a more mature poet. On April 24, 1833, Samuel Taylor Coleridge had written some negative comments about the young poet Alfred Tennyson:

'The misfortune is, that he has begun to write verses without very well understanding what metre is. Even if you write in a known and approved metre, the odds are, of you are not a metrist yourself, that you will; not write harmonious verses; but to deal in new metres without considering what metre means and requires, is preposterous' (qtd. in Hagen 86)

Coleridge continues his harsh criticism of the young poet, telling him to spend the next "two or three years in none but one or two well-known and strictly defined metres" (Hagen 86). Tennyson, as would be expected, took offense to Coleridge's comments and "responded forcefully but quite privately by writing a marginal note in a specially-bound volume of the 1830 and 1833 collections of his poems" (Hagen 86).

Coleridge may have overstepped his bounds or he may have not. Regardless, the comment helped propel the future poet-laureate towards a mastery of meter, as exhibited in "The Charge of the Light Brigade." In the poem, Tennyson, like a composer, masterfully guides the rise and fall of the words, the arrangement of the stressed and unstressed words, and, as a result, lulls his reader slowly into a hypnotic state where the whole of the human anatomy slows down to match the heavy feeling of melancholy and descent that the lines provide. The reader's pulse and breathing, as argued by the romanticist theorists of meter, are directly affected by how a poet constructs his or her lines. Tennyson purposefully designed his dactylic meter to convey the futility of the charge and to slide the reader into a hypnotic state.

Footnotes

1. The Chatterton stanza that appears is taken from the Stenberg article.